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### An Amateur's Prolegomenon

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## An Amateur's Prolegomenon

My eyes, I now realise, are trained to require large white spaces to see detail more efficiently, but the white in this room is not welcome. The white in this room disrupts not only the proportions of the walls themselves, but also the four windows, and the creaking door.

**E**ditors' Note: *We invited Maria Fusco to contribute a text to the first number of PARSE based on her practice as an artist writer and educator. We present here Fusco's text in the form of a series of "prose poems" or "entries," written in response to our invitation to consider the question of judgement. This work may also be read in conjunction with previously published work by the author occasioned by her role as writer-in-residence at the Lisbon Architecture Triennale<sup>1</sup>. This is then followed by a coda and series of questions exchanged between the author and the editorial team performing the interchange and generative misprision of different genres.*

Terms of assemblage are necessitated by that which needs to be judged through the arrangement of their components. An eight pointed star, stretched within four rising stars, surmounted with a crown. The Marquês' heraldic arms may be found in just two locations in the palácio: situated above the noble gates which butt onto Rua do Século, and on the uppermost landing of the grand central staircase retained as shields by two stone lions. These arms are a mediation. Marquês Pombal, born Sebastião José

Carvalho e Mello, was only later conferred with the title of Marquês. Whilst the Carvalho e Mello family may have owned the stars, it was King João V who owned what was above them.

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How imagination remembers is twofold, acts of greed and ingenuity. I believe these impulses to be linked, in a narrative sense. Imagination is always greedy, never sated, or full, with the present. Imagination informs the imagineer: I need more! Just as the belly of the compulsive eater must be filled, so imagination can never be stuffed. Memory feeds famished imagination, but memory is a faulty mechanism: a selfish, subjective substance also requiring constant nourishment itself in order to function in any low state.

Memory cannot be entrusted with conservation.

Conservation is a contrary motion pushing and pulling; forever the desire to move forwards, yet looking forever backwards to ensure it is going the right way, doing the right thing. What conservation requires is proof. Conservation needs proof in order to be able to proceed with sureness. This proof is not easy to come by. Detailed systems of discovery and exposure need to be set in place in order to pinpoint such proof. Proof is, of course, always contextual and may only be seen as certain if it may be compared with other, very similar, things, or processes. The definition of verisimilitude depends of course on what sort of proof is it you're after.

The proof of Palácio Pombal is evidenced in what is left behind.

I'm looking at the proof this *was* a palácio, not that it still is one. I accept. I've come here to experience closely, to try for clarity. And what is called into question, rather what arises as a question from my observations is: How can I be sure?

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I am trying to act as a recording device. And such is the difficulty of hearing, of

hearing properly that I have had to stand here listening intently for quite some time, three hours to be precise. I am standing here listening, even as I write this, trying not to acknowledge the scraping of my pen's nib on paper. The nib. Trying to listen to what the palácio wants to tell me, I'm sure most of it I can't understand, or maybe I understand in my own way, perhaps succeeding only in getting it wrong. The nib. Complete accuracy in listening is not possible yet essential, making the effort after all is respectful towards the person, or thing, trying to tell you something. The nib.

I have sometimes pretended to know or to understand what I did not know or understand. I have done this in an attempt to avoid embarrassment, shame, my lack of knowledge or comprehension, my ignorance. I continue to do this. But not today. It is a useless method to move through the palácio. To acknowledge publicly you do not know, to try to listen, to understand in the moment is more useful and forceful. Forceful, in that such listening responds with sensitivity to force.

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- *Shame. Do I decree Palácio Pombal an underwhelming space?*
  - *Is time here shot through with my fancy to assess a real time palácio, not a past tense palácio?*
  - *Is the palácio not the site people such as myself access often, or for any length of time, how then to calibrate if this is an extramundane space?*
  - *Why should I stay here?*
  - *Why should I not stay here?*
  - *Is it necessary for me to sink air, to inhale and exhale dust in order to be in charge?*
  - *Where are the places I may more easily adapt to my own scale?*
  - *Shall I attempt to normalise being here through a donation, give here back to myself with the sole aim of making it more familiar and therefore useful?*
  - *Which phantom should be here to greet me?*



This room has been painted white to resemble a contemporary art gallery. Facing west onto the garden, its four walls are regularised into tall, blank surfaces that serve the purpose of pointing my gaze upwards towards the stucco ceiling. Because white gives me less to look at, it makes it easier for me to focus on that which is not white. My eyes, I now realise, are trained to require large white spaces to see detail more efficiently, but the white in this room is not welcome. The white in this room disrupts not only the proportions of the walls themselves, but also the four windows, and the creaking door.

This white is imported, it doesn't belong.

Sun catches the particles filling the air around me, filling this city. As I catch the light, I have function, I have use. I am often used to draw attention to that which is not me or mine. White paint, not I, a lens to help the lazy eye identify with surety that which is the most important to see.

And which of these things I spy should I choose to tell you about? It is necessary for me to numerate in order to properly tell, but what does description really tell you about being here? About the opacity of history and the normalisation of trace as a tool to group what has gone before? My intention, to be honest, is somewhat an act of subjective capture, which I hope to sustain without evidence, without the appearance of research and the hammering in of the nails of historical fact. Just as the beams hold themselves together to retain the openness of this palácio, so its collective histories are a desirable amalgam of detail to be inserted here.

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## Coda

An exercise in choice, a real-time reportage of Palácio de Marquês de Pombal in Lisbon, Portugal. Produced as one method in my role of writer-in-residence at the Lisbon Architecture Triennale field, in the abandoned seventeenth century palácio, built by the inventor of the grid system, the rebuilder of Lisbon. Examining the affective, physical vulnerability of the decrepit palácio; utilising the very surface of

description as a means of critical judgement; giving materials voice; restoring evaluative purpose to the amateur, to form a prolegomenon of mediated histories and research.

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## Dialogue

**PARSE:** In your coda to the text(s) you speak of “utilising the very surface of description as a means of critical judgement; giving materials voice.” Throughout the texts there is a recurrence of the question of recording / listening, understanding / describing, perceiving / registering.... of “verisimilitude” and “proof”: We are interested in the way in which these movements between an opening of perception and a disclosing of encounter with the “object” are woven through the texts announcing – or enacting – that judgement is already at work in the preliminary apprehension of the “object” – in this case the Palácio. This question of the adequacy of a means of disclosure – “the surface of description” – to the material occasion of perception/description seems on the one hand both something longstanding and well-established within the history of European aesthetic reflection and also as something that has become entirely contemporary by virtue of a renewed engagement with questions of “object” in ontology and phenomenology. On the other hand, the question of the writerly medium of description might direct us to questions of the material specificity of representational means and genres – (the scratching of “the nib,” not the clattering of the keyboard / meditation, not reportage). Where do you position your engagement with these problematics? Is it with reference to a longstanding tradition of the rhetoric of representation or with reference to this recent turn to the “object” ... or is it oriented to something entirely different from these?

**MARIA FUSCO:** I met recently with a very interesting geochemist; we are trying to find the right way to work together on a project I’m researching. In attempting to articulate how he and his colleagues extrapolate data from rock he told me “We *listen* very closely to what it has to tell us.”

*The Stone Tape* is a BBC TV ghost story first broadcast in 1972. In the film, a group of acoustic scientists chance upon how and what the stone *hears* and *records* across time. The stone is always on, never off.

There is a hierarchy of rhetoric and representation between the two examples I give. Rock is the primary non-representational source, as aggregate non-linear matter. Stone is the secondary representational source, as processed, dispossessed material.


**PARSE:** In your elaboration of a critical reflection in the act of art writing itself you create a crossing of many genres – the poetic text, the diaristic text, the artist's statement, the critical meditation, the report, the performative text, etc. In contemporary art writing we have seen a resolute turn to experimental writing, poetic performance and the movement to cross between poetry and “visual” arts (perhaps an unhappy term). This movement across genres, and across forms, might be seen to present a challenge to questions of judgement – in as much as the canons of literary criticism (such as they are) and the discursive ebullience of contemporary art discourses, as well as the massively expanded textual productivity of internet culture, would seem to create a radically complex and heterogeneous space of “writing”. In what way do you navigate these issues? Or are these questions not centrally relevant for your practice because you are rather more focused on the specificity of each occasion of writing?

**MARIA FUSCO:** Two years ago I had to locate an allotted teaching room in an unfamiliar university block in Copenhagen. I'd been given instructions, all doors were open, so I entered the building with ease. I passed up through the narrow stairwell to the fourth floor, I turned a tight scuffed corner and looked down to see how the wall met with the speckled terrazzo floor at my feet. As I did this, I was overcome with an extremely strong sense of *déjà vu*. I have definitely done this before, I thought. This was a feeling I never experience whilst writing.

**PARSE:** The relationship between judgement and public-ness is a complex matter in the development of the system of the fine arts: arguably it is precisely through the fact of a public discussion of judgements of works of art that the fine arts achieve their identity in European modernity – i.e., that through public debates on judgements of merit that some activities become attached to an aesthetic reflective discourse (e.g., the pre-Revolutionary Salons and the emergence of a critical discourse in response to a viewing public.) In what ways do the questions of writing as a public activity and of judgement as an intrinsic part of the writing process, as you present it, interact? We are thinking here of your own work in publishing *The Happy Hypocrite* and in orchestrating a public space for art writing that moves across a number of different “scenes”?

**MARIA FUSCO:** We are no longer needed by what we created.

## Notes:

1. M. Fusco. How Imagination Remembers. *The White Review*. May. 2014.  
<http://www.thewhitereview.org/features/how-imagination-remembers/> 
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## Maria Fusco

Maria Fusco is a Belfast-born interdisciplinary writer based in Scotland working across the registers of fiction, criticism and art writing. She is a Reader at the University of Edinburgh and was Director of Art Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her work is published internationally and is translated into more than seven languages. She is founder/editorial director of *The Happy Hypocrite*, a journal for, and about, experimental art writing. She was commissioned by Film London to write the screenplay for *Gonda* a film by Ursula Mayer. Fusco was recently selected for the prestigious Artangel/BBC Radio 4 Open commission for which she will produce BBC Radio 4 programmes and a site-specific performance inside a mountain on the west coast of Scotland, in October 2015. She is an Hawthornden Fellow, Scotland, and was Writer-in-Residence at Lisbon Architecture Triennale, Whitechapel Gallery, London and Kadist Art Foundation, Paris. Her most recent book is *With A Bao A Qu Reading When Attitudes Become Form* (2013), and her first collection of short stories *The Mechanical Copula* (2011), was selected for an international translation series in French as *Copulation Mécanique* (2012). See also [www.mariafusco.net](http://www.mariafusco.net)

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